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SUBJECT: AIT NOMINATION FOR THE 2010 SECRETARY'S AWARD FOR
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE: SHIH CHENG YEN

REF: STATE 111471

¶1. (U) AIT is pleased to nominate SHIH Cheng Yen for the 2010 Secretary's Award for International Women of Courage.

¶2. (U) Cheng Yen is a Buddhist nun, teacher, philanthropist, and the founder and leader of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation. Cheng Yen established the Tzu Chi Foundation in 1966 with a mission to bring charity to the poor and inspire love and humanity in both givers and receivers. From its first 30 members, housewives who saved two cents a day from their grocery money to help the poor, Tzu Chi has grown into over five million members in 47 countries, and is now one of the world's largest philanthropic organizations. Cheng Yen's determination, charisma, and devotion to helping individuals in need have inspired and motivated millions of Tzu Chi volunteers to provide services around the world in the fields of medicine, education, environmental protection, and international relief.

¶3. (U) Tzu Chi's work in the medical field includes establishing the world's third-largest bone marrow donor registry, operating free dental and medical clinics, and training nurses and doctors who serve disadvantaged populations around the world. Tzu Chi has also established education programs for children from preschool through college age in numerous countries. In Taiwan, the foundation operates over 4,500 recycling centers and is actively involved in community-based environmental programs globally. Tzu Chi has pioneered efforts to recycle plastic bottles into textiles, and has already turned some 12 million used bottles into more than 200,000 blankets that have been distributed to disaster victims.

¶4. (U) When Cheng Yen decided to become a Buddhist nun, it was over the objections of her mother. When she first went to register for ordination, she was rejected. But Cheng Yen persevered and took to heart the instruction of her teacher to "work for Buddhism and for all living beings." In 1966 she was asked, "What has Buddhism done for society?," and soon after witnessed firsthand the terrible consequences of poverty and poor medical care in Taiwan's aboriginal communities. Cheng Yen took up the challenge implicit in that question and worked tirelessly to build the Tzu Chi Foundation into one of the world's foremost charitable and relief organizations. Despite criticisms early-on from some of her compatriots for Tzu Chi's work in Mainland China and the difficulties of bringing aid to disasters zones in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan, Cheng Yen has stayed true to her core value of providing compassionate relief to whoever is in need. Cheng Yen has been called "Taiwan's Mother Theresa," and her example has undeniably been an inspiration and a blessing to millions of individuals around the world.

15. (U) Tzu Chi's most far-reaching contributions, arguably, are in the field of disaster relief. Projects have been launched in countries ranging from Ethiopia to North Korea, from Rwanda to Cambodia, and also the United States. Following Hurricane Katrina, Tzu Chi supplied more than USD 4 million in shopping cards, bedding, and medical care and supplies to victims. In the wake of the devastating 2004 Asian tsunami, Tzu Chi worked in Sri Lanka and Indonesia to provide permanent housing, education, and medical assistance, including in areas that had seen ethnic or religious conflict. This past August's Typhoon Morakot disaster in Taiwan claimed an estimated 700 lives and displaced thousands. Tzu Chi volunteers directed by Cheng Yen were among the first to brave dangerous conditions to provide emergency financial assistance, hot meals, and clean-up crews to affected areas. Tzu Chi's highly efficient organizational structure and leadership put the foundation at the forefront of Morakot relief efforts and earned widespread praise. Tzu Chi is now in the process of building sustainable eco-villages for displaced aboriginal populations, offering victims jobs in construction and on the organic farms that will support the new villages' economies, and is taking great care to respect each displaced tribe's traditions, religion, and culture.

16. (U) Tzu Chi's apolitical stance has earned it respect from all parties in Taiwan and around the world. In fact, the Tzu Chi Foundation has been working in Mainland China for nearly two decades, and in 2008 was the first non-PRC foundation to receive legal recognition in the PRC. Cheng Yen has referred

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to Tzu Chi's relief work in Mainland China as "building a bridge of love," and she has overcome political difficulties to forge a successful example of cross-Straits cooperation, which culminated most recently in the substantial material aid and social services that Tzu Chi provided to victims of last year's Sichuan earthquake.

17. (U) Full legal name: Ms. SHIH Cheng Yen
Job title/association: Founder, Tzu Chi Foundation
Date of birth: 04-May-1937
Place of birth: Taiwan
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18. (U) AIT Women's Issues POC is Political Officer Deanna Kim, tel: 886-2-2162-2086.
STANTON